

Status of the Gray Wolf in the Upper Midwest and Iowa

Historic Status in the Upper Midwest

Several subspecies of gray wolves (*Canis lupus spp.*) inhabited the upper Midwest and were important apex predators of large prey mammals, but also fed opportunistically on smaller species. Gray wolves also preyed on domestic animals especially when Europeans first settled the upper Midwest. From the mid-1800s thru early 1900s, gray wolves were subject to intensive eradication efforts. At the same time there was a declining abundance of prey species such as deer due to unregulated shooting. Wolves were extirpated from most of the lower 48 states by the mid-1960s leaving only a small intact population in northern Minnesota. By 1974, gray wolves were protected as an endangered species in all 48 states under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Since then, populations have grown and become established in the western Great Lakes region, which includes a dispersal range into Iowa.



Western Great Lakes Gray Wolves

The population of ~1,000 wolves in northern Minnesota grew in the 1980s due to protection from harvest under the ESA and regional increases in white tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*). Wolf range in Minnesota spread southward to north central and central regions. By 1998, their estimated population was ~2,300, which has remained stable to slightly increasing since then. Dispersing individuals from Minnesota colonized populations in northern Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan currently estimated to have greater than 780 and 680 wolves in each. Dispersing wolves from Minnesota are also somewhat common in North and South Dakota.

The U.S. Department of Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service administers the ESA and has worked to allow more state rights' management of gray wolves. Delisting in January 2012 allowed Minnesota and Wisconsin a wolf harvest season in the fall/winter 2012-2014 when annual harvest ranged from 117 to 413 wolves in each state. This generated considerable controversy between wildlife professionals and animal rights activists. In December 2014 the Federal court overturned the delisting and this population is now listed as an endangered species and protected by Federal law.

Northern Rocky Mountain Gray Wolves

Wolves were translocated from Canada to several areas in Montana and Idaho in the mid-1990s. The newly colonized populations in Yellowstone National Park (Montana) and central Idaho grew rapidly and today there are ~1,700 wolves in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming.

The U.S. portion of the Rocky Mountain wolf population was delisted from threatened in July 2008 which allowed for legal harvest under approved state management plans, however an injunction by animal rights activists placed them

back on the Threatened List preventing harvest. Court disputes between activist groups, ranchers, and government agencies continued for the next few years. As of February 2024, the gray wolf is still officially delisted from the Endangered Species Act. Many western states allow wolves to be readily killed if there is concern for the welfare of livestock.

Gray Wolf Status in Iowa

Two subspecies of gray wolves occurred in Iowa, the Great Plains wolf (*Canis lupus nubilus*) which followed bison herds on the plains, and the eastern timber wolf (*Canis lupus lycaon*) which inhabited more wooded areas. The gray wolf is designated as a furbearer under the Iowa Code likely because they were not clearly separated from the coyote in early bounty legislation. As a federally listed endangered species, take is prohibited under the ESA and the Iowa harvest season is closed.

As the Western Great Lakes wolf population grew in the mid-1990s, a few wolves were appearing in west-central Wisconsin and southeast Minnesota, ~75 miles from the Iowa border. It is very likely major river corridors, especially the Mississippi River, in this tri-state region (MN, WI, IA) serve as travel corridors for wolves. This Driftless region is relatively rugged and there is some habitat conducive to wolves, however most of Iowa is considered unsuitable habitat.

Gray Wolf Reports in Iowa

There have been several reports of wolves since 2004 primarily in eastern and northern counties and a few have been confirmed with tracks, pictures, or sightings by experienced person(s). An occasional wolf has been killed in Iowa, typically by coyote hunters who mistakenly mis-identified the animal. DNA evidence from these wolves usually indicates they're from the Western Great Lakes wolf population.

Reports from surrounding states also suggest wolves are traveling through Iowa. In 2002, a wolf was shot in Houston County, Minnesota, which is adjacent to Allamakee County in northeast IA. Wolves have been seen or shot in Missouri as well, one of which was a radio-collared animal that dispersed 600 miles south from Michigan. Dispersing wolves from MN or WI will likely continue to occur in Iowa. However, there is not a breeding population at this time and is unlikely given the lack of suitable habitat.

Coyotes, large dogs, and gray wolves appear similar at a distance so hunters and reporting individuals need to be careful in their identification. More information on identifying wolves vs coyotes is available on the Iowa DNR's website under 'occasional wildlife visitors'. If you encounter a wolf please call your area Iowa DNR wildlife biologist or DNR Law Enforcement Officer.

Sources:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service:

Western Great Lakes Wolf Population. [Gray Wolf \(Canis lupus\) | U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service](#)

Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Population [Species Assessment Form: Gray Wolf in the Northern Rocky Mountains and the Western United States | FWS.gov](#)